

THE NEGRO PHYSICIAN IN NORTH JERSEY  
and the  
EARLY HISTORY OF THE NORTH JERSEY  
MEDICAL SOCIETY

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The first recorded Negro physician in North New Jersey as far as I am able to determine was George Wilberforce Rolerfort, who was born on January 20, 1860. He was graduated from grammar school in Lexington, Virginia in 1874. He worked at blacksmithing and at the barber trade in Lexington and Leesburg, Virginia until 1880 when he entered Morgan College in Baltimore from which institution he graduated in 1884. Subsequently he entered the Leonard Medical Department of Shaw University at Raleigh North Carolina, from which institution he graduated with the degree of M.D. in 1890, after which he came to Newark, and began the practice of medicine. He became active in the political affairs of his adopted city and was made official physician to the Newark City Alms House.

He died in 1903 and a scroll sent to his wife and signed by all members of the common council and the acting Mayor J. W. Bachellor states that "In his death Newark loses one of its most valued citizens."

It is interesting to note that Dr. Rolerfort died at age 43 years which was the mean death rate at the turn of the twentieth century and which death rate increased to sixty years in 1920, to sixty-nine in 1970 and now according to figures released by the Metropolitan Insurance Company, the life expectancy at birth in 1971 has climbed to 71.3 years. In 1900 there were only 3,000,000 Americans



65 years or older as compared to 20,000,000 in 1970 and a projected 30,000,000 in the year 2000.

They were not more than ten Negro physicians in North Jersey at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among this group was Dr. George Cannon, who began his practice in Jersey City in 1900. He later became very active in the political life of the nation, and was the first Negro to make a nominating speech at a national political convention, which he did in seconding Calvin Coolidge's nomination for the Presidency at the Republican convention in the fall of 1923.

Dr. Cannon served for many years as chairman of the executive committee of the National Medical Association, which association had been organized in 1895. It was during his chairmanship of this committee that the Veterans Hospital at Tuskegee, Alabama was completed and prominent local white citizens, many openly members of the Ku Klux Klan insisted that the professional staff be white. A committee was then formed which obtained an audience with President Warren G. Harding and General John L. Hines, who had been appointed V.A. head after a distinguished career in World War I, having served with Pershing as Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army and later succeeding Pershing as Chief of Staff; as a result of this conference an agreement was reached that the V.A. Hospital at Tuskegee should be staffed by Negro profession-



al personnel.

Another of the physicians who began the practice of medicine at the beginning of the twentieth century was Dr. Hayes Burnett of Montclair who was possibly the first graduate of Howard University to begin his practice here, though Howard graduated its first Medical class in 1879, and some of its graduates did come to New Jersey later in their careers.

I was unable to determine who was the first graduate in New Jersey from Meharry Medical College, but this Medical school has produced many of the outstanding practitioners in medicine and surgery here in the past fifty years. It is of interest to note that until the nineteen sixties over ninety per cent of the Negro medical practitioners here in North Jersey were graduates of either Howard or Meharry Medical College.

Early in the century there was a marked increase in the Negro population of New Jersey and naturally a corresponding increase in the Negro professionals which increase however always lagged behind the general increase in the population, the reasons for this are clear and prevailed throughout the country.

It was during this period or specifically in 1907 that it was decided by those physicians of colour in Northern New Jersey that there were enough of them with similar



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problems to have an organization of their own although retaining membership in the New Jersey State Medical Society and the American Medical Association. It was also decided that the coloured dentists should be members of the organization; so under the leadership of Dr. Cannon and Dr. W. G. Alexander the North Jersey Medical Society came into existence.

Dr. W. G. Alexander was awarded his M.D. degree in 1903 from the Boston College of Physicians and Surgeons and who after practicing a year in Kemball West Virginia opened his office in Orange, New Jersey in 1904 where he was a general practioner until 1953. He practiced his profession with dedication and took an active part in his community and all aspects of social welfare, setting a fine example to many of the physicians who have followed him and who have made excellent contributions along the way.

In 1920 he was elected to the House of Assembly, the first Negro to be elected to that office in New Jersey and during his terms in the legislature, he sponsored civil rights and pre marital examination bills and acted as Speaker of the House of Assembly.

In 1931 he was made a member of the State Board of Health and served as its vice-president.

In 1944 he received the Distinguished Service Medal of the National Medical Association and later was awarded an

MILLERS FALLS



Honorary Degree from his alma mater Lincoln University.

Three other members of the North Jersey Medical Society have subsequently served in the Assembly and the first Negro member of the New Jersey Senate was a member of the North Jersey Medical Society.

As stated before, many years earlier in 1895 the National Medical Association was organized by twelve Negro physicians who met at an exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. The organization pledged itself to raise the standards of the medical profession and of medical education, to stimulate favorable relationships among all physicians, to nurture the growth and diffusion of medical knowledge, to sponsor the education of the public concerning all matters affecting the public health, to sponsor the enactment of just medical laws and to eliminate religious and racial discrimination from American medical institutions.

The credo of the association was given expression by Dr. Charles V. Roman of Tennessee one of the founders when he stated that "The organization was conceived in no spirit of racial exclusion, fostering no ethnic antagonism, but born of the exigencies of the American environment." The National Medical Association has for its objectives the banding together for mutual cooperation and helpfulness, men and women who are legally and honourably engaged in the practice of medicine and surgery.



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Here I might mention the fact that in 1927 when sixty Negro dentists were registered in the state, it was decided that there was a definite need for their own organization in New Jersey and in the nation. A meeting was called at the office of Dr. J. L. Baxter on 20 So. Day Street in Orange, which office incidentally was the former office of Dr. John Ballard who was the first Negro dentist who had graduated from an approved dental college, to practice in the state of New Jersey.

Dr. Baxter of Orange, New Jersey was elected President, Dr. John Hayes, Asbury Park, Secretary, Dr. George Kyle from Paterson, Secretary and Dr. W. S. Wiley of Newark, Treasurer. In July 1932, a National Dental Organization was formed and Dr. Robert Thompson of Westfield who served as chairman of the National Convention Committee was unanimously elected its first secretary treasurer: Both he and Dr. Baxter later have served terms as president of this National organization.

In 1932 the name of the New Jersey Dental Society was changed to the Commonwealth Dental Society to avoid confusion with the New Jersey State Dental Society.

Among other physicians who have made outstanding contributions here in New Jersey are Dr. Peter Marshall Murray, who later moved to New York, became one of the early members of the American College of Surgeons and later was elected



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president of the Manhattan County Medical Society, and the first Negro delegate to the American Medical Association. He served a term as president of the National Medical Association and was a trustee of Howard University for many years.

Other North Jersey physicians who have served as alumni trustee of Howard University are Dr. George Bell, of Montclair, medical class of 1920 and Dr. J. W. Parker Sr., of Redbank, New Jersey a 1915 graduate. Dr. Parker also served for many years as a member of the New Jersey State Board of Education, having been appointed by Governor Alfred Driscoll, a Republican and re-appointed by Governor Robert Meyner a Democrat.

Another physician who cannot be overlooked was Dr. John A. Kinney who came to Newark in 1924 who after his graduation from Leonard (Shaw) Medical School in 1901 and serving an internship in Freedmans Hospital in Washington, D. C. accepted a position as school physician at Tuskegee, Alabama offered to him by Booker T. Washington. Dr. Kinney later became Medical Director and Chief Surgeon of the John A. Andrew Clinical Society. He served as secretary of the National Medical Association from 1904 until 1912 and became president in 1912. He served as editor of the Journal of the National Medical Association from 1916 until 1948. During its thirty-two years the Journal was the chief medium of medical and scientific expression of Negro physicians. Because of Dr.

MILLERS FALLS



Kinney's stand to have the newly built V. A. hospital at Tuskegee staffed by Negro physicians, he became a "marked man." The Klan paraded at the institute, a cross was burned on his front lawn. Anonymous threats were received by mail and phone; so on the advice from a white friend that the Klan was plotting his death, he moved his family to New Jersey and was the house guest of Dr. George Cannon of Jersey City until he could reestablish himself in Newark, New Jersey.

After practicing in Newark for three years and finding no welcome in Newark hospitals for Negro physicians at that time, he contrived to build in 1927 a modern fire proof thirty bed private hospital named the Kinney Memorial Hospital in honour of his parents. In 1934 he gave it as a Christmas gift to the Negro people of Northern New Jersey as represented by the Booker T. Washington Community Hospital Association. It is felt that the first three Negro surgeons in New Jersey who were admitted to membership in the American College of Surgeons though receiving their training prior to coming here could not have qualified for this body had it not been for the existence of this hospital.

Here I must give a great deal of credit to the late Dr. L. Greeley Brown of Elizabeth, who was president of the Medical Staff throughout its twenty plus years as a community hospital and whose devotion had a great deal to do with keeping the staff organization running smoothly.



The North Jersey Medical Society along with other organizations notably the Urban League and a larger number of fair minded physicians and other persons of many ethnic groups helped to break down the prejudice which at one time kept Negro physicians and nurses off the staff of many hospitals both private and public even though many of the former were founded by religious organizations and the latter supported by tax dollars of all the citizens. As far as the Negro professional was concerned it was truly a case of "Taxation without representation."

There are many female physicians who have made outstanding contributions both in their communities and in the State. To mention just a few are Dr. Lucille Miller of Orange who incidentally was possibly one of the first graduates of Meharry Medical College here and who served for many years as secretary of the medical section of the National Medical Association.

Dr. Lena Edwards an Obstetrician in Jersey City who later did outstanding work as a missionary in Texas and has been one of the few recipients awarded the Freedom Medal, which is the highest honour given by the United States Government to civilians. This award was made by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Dr. Mae McCarroll of Newark who among other contributions has served for many years as chairman of the publica-



tion committee of the Journal of the National Medical Association.

Many of the physicians who have located in North Jersey have made outstanding contributions in their respective communities. Many have been elevated to attending on various services, officers on the staff of many hospitals, and two have recently been appointed as members of the trustee board of the hospitals where they are serving on the medical staff.

Several have been placed on the faculty of the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry and one has been appointed to its trustee board, and one physician is now serving in the cabinet of the present Governor as his Commissioner of Health.

Scholarship and support has been given to many students both individually and as an organization.

I would like to add that the progress that has been made by the Negro professional is due not only to his own efforts, but could not have been accomplished without the cooperation and assistance of many of the fair minded physicians and other citizens of all ethnic backgrounds.

We can truly state that the Negro physician has made a contribution to the welfare of the people in the state of New Jersey.



REFERENCES,  
PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Mrs. Esther Rolerfort, Daughter-in-law of Dr. Rolerfort

Mrs. Gladys Nunnery, Daughter of Dr. George Cannon

Dr. R. H. Thompson, Westfield, New Jersey

Office of Alumni Affairs, Meharry Medical College

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Directory of Graduates Howard University Mr. Frederick D. Wil-  
kinson former Registrar and Research Associate -  
Howard University.